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ABSTRACT

In October 1996, adult educators from throughout the world gathered in Charlotte, North Caroline, for the annual conference of the American Association for Adult and Continuing Education. The following challenges were identified as the four megachallenges facing adult education and adult educators at the dawning of the 21st century: advancing technology and its impact on curriculum and instruction; the associated shift to an information and service economy in an increasing global marketplace; shifting demographics in the workplace and classroom; and the growing instability of sociocultural and political structures throughout the world. The four challenges became the subject of extended conversation that focused primarily on the complex factors underlying each challenge. It was concluded that adult educators can help their students adapt to rapid technological advancement and the shift to an information-based economy by fostering reflective and critical thinking, facilitating learning how to learn skills, and increasing opportunities for equal and meaningful discourse in the learning environment. It was further concluded that, in response to recent demographic shifts, adult educators must increase their sensitivities to all learners, foster appreciation for diversity, and work to empower learners to help prepare them to meet the challenges that lie ahead. (MN)

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CHALLENGE

North Carolina Adult Education Association

July 1997

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

"Warning: Dates on the Calendar are Closer Than They Appear - 21st Century Challenges for Adult Educators,"
by Dr. Vivian W. Mott

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FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Editor's Note: The North Carolina Adult Education Association has historically held a warm and accepting atmosphere for professional adult educators in North Carolina. As a young graduate student in Adult Education, NCAEA served as a supportive mentor to me as it has to many for over 40 years. This issue of Challenge and Future Directions is again combined into one publication. Thanks go to the editorial team of Vicki Spillane (a new NCAEA member) and Al Bunal. Thanks also to the officers, committee chairs and the Secretary, Ms. Paula Schubert, for much of the content.

A special tribute and thanks to Dr. Vivian Mott for the Future Directions article in this issue. Dr. Mott is a professor of adult education at East Carolina University and a member of NCAEA.

WARNING:

DATES ON THE CALENDAR ARE CLOSER THAN THEY APPEAR– 21st CENTURY CHALLENGES FOR ADULT EDUCATORS

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In a "Future Directions" column, an article entitled "21st Century Challenges" would seem obvious if not trite, but that is exactly the focus of what is before you. And the challenges of the quickly approaching new century are amplified by the warning above, in spite of its humorous tone. For the bureaucracies in which many of us function and the dynamic nature of the challenges themselves make them even more crucial yet problematic. And, as NCAEA President Esther Powell reminded us in her message last fall, appropriate responses to many of North Carolina's educational, economic, and societal challenges will fall to adult educators across the state.

In October of 1996, adult educators from throughout the world gathered in Charlotte for the annual conference of the American Association for Adult & Continuing Education. As is frequently the case with such professional meetings, one of the greatest benefits of the conference came about through casual networking conversations which blossomed spontaneously over morning coffee, during a quick lunch, or after dinner gatherings when two practitioners are joined by two more, and then by others. Suddenly a wellspring of ideas, speculations, and introspection would erupt from which all are able to learn. The dialogue in one such meeting turned to a few of the many challenges and opportunities faced by educators now at the end of the century — ***advancing technology*** and its impact on curriculum and instruction, the associated shift to an ***information and service economy*** in an increasing global marketplace, ***shifting demographics*** in the workplace and classroom, and the growing ***instability of socio-cultural and political structures*** throughout the world. Unfortunately (but not surprisingly), our small group failed to even adequately uncover all of the nuances of these four "mega-challenges" — as one of our group referred to them — much less begin to solve any of them. In fact, our extended conversation focused instead on consideration of the complex factors underlying them in the hope that our shared insights and collective understanding might somehow help us prepare to meet the challenges of the dawning 21st century.

Reflecting later on the discussion of the "mega-challenges" I recalled reading Naisbitt and Aburdene's Megatrends 2000 in which the authors cite ten "trends of the 1990's [sic]. Conceived under the influence of the next millennium, these new megatrends are the gateways to the 21st century" (1990, p. 11). According to Naisbitt and Aburdene, the ten overarching trends which are already exerting tremendous influence on our lives include (1) increasing global prosperity, (2) a new appreciation of the arts and a shift in leisure pursuits, (3) the transformation of socialism to a free-market model, (4) cosmopolitan lifestyles in the face of rising cultural nationalism, (5) the emergence of local and private-sector alternatives to big government, (6) economic and cultural expansion of the Pacific Rim, (7) women as the new leadership archetype, (8) the metaphor of biology in support of an adaptive, holistic understanding of society, (9) renewed interest in and appreciation

for our spiritual selves, and (10) personal empowerment accompanied by a rise in individual responsibility. Naisbitt and Aburdene suggest that these ten trends not only define society in the 1990s, but serve as beacons and guideposts for "utopian quest for peace and prosperity [and] a fresh start in the year 2000" (p. 313). Perhaps the trends offer understanding and perspective for the four mega-challenges as well.

Advancing technology is both a god-send and trial (more for some of us than others!) for adult educators. Recalling the trends identified by Naisbitt and Aburdene, global prosperity and the rise of economic dominance in the Pacific Rim are among the factors associated with technological advances throughout the world. The Silicon Valley of the southwestern United States, once identified worldwide as the center of technological innovation, is now joined by competitors in southern India, Malaysia, Japan, Korea, Australia, and elsewhere. Not only are technological capabilities growing at an exponential rate, but our dependence on technology is increasing as well. And perhaps no other challenge so dramatically affects the adult educator. A joint report by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, and the National Educational Research Policy and Priorities Board redefines workplace literacy in their estimation that "nearly half (46 percent) of adult workers use computers on the job" and they challenge adult educators to "orient their curricula and instructional strategies to the needs of today's learners and tomorrow's workplace" (pp. 6-7). Through technological advances, learners no longer even need be in the same physical location much less a classroom, and knowledge generated thousands of miles away is easily and immediately available at our fingertips and, more importantly, those of the learners. Without leaving our keyboards, we can exchange dialogue and data with colleagues half a world away, access literature without a trip to the library shelves, and transmit assignments around the globe. Our informal and recreational learning is changed by the technology as well. We can now view a painting in the Louvre, learn a new language from a tutor in South Africa, Europe, or Asia, or listen to Martin Luther King describe his dream for society. Not all of the burgeoning information accessible via technology is valid or valuable, however. Therefore, educators and learners alike must critically evaluate the information available and become discriminating consumers of websites, posted data, and even software and equipment. Other challenges associated with those wonders, of course, include reluctance on the part of some to learn and use the technology, inordinate cost and unequal access, overdependence on the technology at the expense of understanding, and even inappropriate and unethical use.

The move toward an ***information and service economy*** is a function of both advancing technology and increasing global competitiveness. Emerging free-market socialism in much of the world and an increase in entrepreneurship, in partial response to a reduction and decentralization of big government, also contribute to this economic shift and pose additional opportunities for adult education. Opportunities abound for educators and institutions in terms of curriculum development, knowledge and information brokering, program planning and evaluation, as well as implementation. In a knowledge society where the "shelf life" of much of our learning and job skills is rapidly decreasing, workers are called upon to be more flexible and self directed, engage in critical thinking, orchestrate and manage their own learning. Adult educators can help by fostering reflective and critical thinking in the classrooms, facilitating learning "how to learn" skills, and increasing opportunities for equal and meaningful discourse in the learning environment.

Shifting demographics is another challenge adult educators have been aware of and talked about for some time. Numbers of women surpassed men in adult education classrooms in 1974 and their numbers have increased steadily since that time (Merriam & Caffarella, 1991). Women are no longer barred from the boardroom, and we outnumber men in the ownership of small businesses and partnerships. In the 1987 *Workforce 2000* project, the Hudson Institute researchers reported that the "workforce will grow slowly, becoming older, more female, and more disadvantaged. Only 15 percent of the new entrants to the labor force over the next 13 years will be native white males" (p. xiii). Ten years later on the eve of Hudson's *Workforce 2020* report, we know that those figures were underestimated and recognize the strengthening trend toward a "greying" and "browning" of not only our workforce, but our classroom as well. Women, people of color, and those from other cultures are all seeking educational opportunities not only to improve their quality of life, but for self actualization, and contribution to society as well. Our classrooms, living rooms, and workplaces are stronger, more enlightened, and enjoyable because of our diversity — if we celebrate the differences in gender, age, ethnicity, ability, nationality, and even learning orientation. The challenge for adult educators is to increase our sensitivities to all learners, foster an appreciation for diversity, and work toward the empowerment of all individuals with whom we work and learn.

Finally, the ***growing instability of socio-cultural and political structures*** throughout the world was the fourth mega-challenge identified as a concern to adult educators, and perhaps the most troubling. Who among us could have predicted the dismantling of the Berlin Wall or the Soviet Union? And while the reasons can be hotly contested, our own political structure is being plummeted from all sides and many of our own socio-cultural structures have crumbled or been redefined. Naisbitt and Aburdene allude to such instability and argue that

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two megatrends — a renewed sense of spirituality and the rise of personal responsibility — may be responses to such instability. They also maintain that these trends may be indirectly responsible for an increase in concern for ethics, philosophy, and values in our schools. In adult education, we welcome the influence of ethics in many areas of continuing professional education, with many suggesting the need for a standardized code of ethics for the discipline. Most graduate programs include at least one course on various philosophical orientations to the practice of adult education and stress the importance of an articulated educational or practice philosophy. And, finally, we openly acknowledge that education at every level is highly political, socially embedded, and a value laden enterprise.

So, in this fourth mega challenge, as with the other three, adult educators are challenged to practice the reflection and critical thinking that we teach, foster learning environments which not only accommodate but celebrate diversity, and facilitate learning experiences which help prepare all of us for the challenges of the dawning 21st century. The dialogues to explore and increase our understanding of such challenges and the factors which underlie them shouldn't be confined to national or state conferences, or even isolated and spontaneous conversations with colleagues. The challenges which confront adult education in the next century must be the focus of many conversations, seminars, workshops, articles, classroom and boardroom discussions. After all, the date on the calendar is closer than it appears.

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